

*slippery &
amorphous*

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The Crypt,
St Marylebone Parish Church, 17 Marylebone Rd, London NW1 5LT
11 January – 26 March 2016

Curated and organised by Wendy Saunders & Paula MacArthur
Contemporary British Painting exhibition programme 2016

Slippery & Amorphous

Paint is slippery stuff. Fluid & watery or viscous and buttery; it is difficult to handle & challenges the painter to control it, pin it down, fix it.

The painters in this exhibition draw parallels between the slipperiness of their medium & the slipperiness of their mode of expression. They attempt to communicate what is unseen, the things which are in flux, indefinable, even invisible & felt rather than known, learned or copied. As Rosa Lee said in her 2003 essay *

"...it is clear that the 'language' of painting does not readily lend itself to the making of direct statements. It is arguably an art of pure interpretation. For the painter, the codes and languages of painting, like the paint itself, are, by their very nature, slippery and amorphous. As a form of communication, it is invariably a very imprecise tool, prone to ambiguity and subsequent misreadings, if not downright incomprehension, from viewers... The problem, it seems, lies in the interpretive nature of 'meaning' in painting."

Consciously avoiding didacticism, these painters offer honest expressions & seek an authentic response from the viewer. The language of painting, unlike literature, does not

easily communicate definite statements; more akin to a musician's - the painter's process is improvised & more intuitive. It is often ambiguous & open to multiple or misinterpretations. These painters both imitate and invent; they do not rely on simply creating an illusion but allow it to collapse & dissolve. By omitting or actively erasing visual information, they allow the imagination to enter.

We are aware of the accretion of marks over time & get a sense of the gestures which created them. We can imagine ourselves moving as the artist moves while they pour, scrub, stroke & splash on the colour. We feel we have a glimpse into the mind of the artist & can share in their painterly investigations. The surfaces invite us to touch, or at least get up close to study the marks & adjustments. This provides an insight into how the surface may have shifted throughout its development.

Whilst the paint creates an illusion it is also unmistakably paint; in this way the painting gives us a window onto an imagined world & determinedly remains a concrete object. Flitting between imagination & the physical object, the viewer plays with the nature of perception. These paintings suggest improvisation both by artist and viewer; the viewer brings their own experience & imagination, translating what they see into their own internal language.

These painters explore the borderland between the real &

the imagined; they give us just enough, the essentials we need to get a sense of the ideas they are investigating. They do not offer us any direct answers, but rather encourage us to question both image & ourselves, making us aware that we only ever see through our own eyes, with our own accumulated history.

Paula MacArthur & Wendy Saunders September 2015

* Rosa Lee essay 'Threads', Unframed ed. by Rosemary Betterton pub. I.B.Tauris 2004

Natural Abstraction

If '*all the world's a stage*' then the stage is all the world – our world. While you are watching dancers, whether Nureyev, Astaire & Rogers or The Jackson 5, you are longing for an effortless performance: a seamless integration of impossible postures, perfect balancing acts and exquisite gesture; spot on timing. You don't want to see the painful struggle or the hours of arduous practice in those moments: you are there to see the art not the toil - you are there to be coerced, or bewitched, through a perfect choreography of codes and signifiers into a kind of state of wonderment, horror or desire.

But there is a paradox here of course. We know that these human-being performers are fallible and not automatons. And we could also say that the dance performance is actually saturated with both the life experience of the performers as well as the creative labour or work activity of the performers (and this includes the work of the director/choreographer). So although our own previous encounters with, and knowledge and participation of the art-form is perhaps more limited and much less developed, surely, the dance in all its aspects of expression and technical dexterity, physical wit and rhythmic precision, is actually mirroring or at the very least referring to our own human experience? And is it the same with painting? You could say that painting is at the

very least a somatic activity that we have all taken part in at some point in our lives – even if only in school. Through all sorts of life-work experiences we have accumulated a whole range of optical and physical taxonomies of colour, texture, shape, gesture, posture, decoration and design to one degree or another – it's there whether we actively choose to think about it or not. The whole process is one of reflexivity. As Brian Muller wrote in the exhibition catalogue for the exhibition he curated *Real Art 'A New Modernism': British Reflexive Painters in the 1990s*, dance or painting can be sites of creation where *'...it [reflexivity] refers to content being shifted to firmly within the viewer's own cognitive process, in which the viewer watches himself/herself, watching himself/herself looking.'*¹ Mick Finch, writing about Torie Begg one of the artists in the exhibition, substantiates: *'At the heart of Begg's and Muller's texts is a claim that her paintings shift the sense of reception of the work entirely into the field of the viewer. They describe the paintings as producing a material object with no illusionistic residues referring exclusively to the relationships of its own process. This though is done not to present the viewer with a process puzzle to solve but to construct an 'active viewer' who checks imaginary associations of what the painting might be against the material fact of the work.'*²

We are watching the dancers: perhaps The Temptations or maybe ballerina swans spinning on the spot in unison and smiling with ease. We are now looking into the painting as if we are looking into the mirror and experiencing the haptic through materiality, the physical sensations of gesture and

performance through memory and perhaps even the aesthetics of form through knowledge or education. The central relationship: the seesaw of creator and viewer is both empirical and intellectual. The invited participant will absolutely sense the pain, joy and intensity of the performance: she will observe, detect, tingle. We know that each next dance move, every brush stroke or rational calculation could lead to a mistake or a fall so empathetically we are watching ourselves on the knife edge of error and triumph – *will they make it...*? How can we enjoy and understand the aesthetics of good form and dramatic expression, as a viewer, when we can't already 'know' ourselves something of the backdrop of 'toil' and trouble involved: the search to find the right 'arrangement' and the desire to accomplish the perfect move or gesture through endless testing and practice? The imperative is to be able to recognise some of the physiological and psychological aspects of the journey: to be able to perceive some of the fear of failure or the fragile nature of creation in order to then buy into the possibilities of success.

The painters in Slippery & Amorphous present a very natural, human kind of abstraction. The 'purity' of Greenbergian formalism and its self-defining inward looking stance seems a long time ago and now in a post-Richter, post-post-conceptual era we are looking at a hybridity of isms cherry picked with ease from the history of painting

going as far back as the beginning of Modernism in the latter half of the 19th century and further.

The eclecticism of painting today means that you might see a Nabi type sketchbook drawing done in Day-Glo alongside the flourish of accents in an Auerbach, or a Max Ernst frottage in amongst some new imagined apocalyptic landscape. In non-representational work you might see the embrace of a kind of rococo excess: rolls and rolls of paint all piled up, or at the other end the minimalist's approach of reducing it all right down – or as one painter put it 'emptying it all out'. You will see a foray into the depiction of geometric volumetric solids, or perhaps the repetition of wallpaper design patterning, played off with gesture and freestyle graphic line. You might see the human figure distorted, reversed and recalibrated, and in reference to still-life I have seen a banana painted a hundred times or some meat created out of paint: very thick paint in the right meaty colours sculpted to physically resemble a kebab. Surface, materiality, figure-field interplay, breadth and depth, construction and space, Rymanesque object-hood, expressionism (as in auto-biographical), poetry (where someone's poem serves to provide the idea or emotion) or socio-political investigation (current affairs or historical events), as well as different approaches to direct study-like observation and quotation (whether using photographs, famous paintings, some sort of tableau or actually going

‘plein-air’), are all possibilities in a melting pot of what painters may rather casually refer to as a ‘painterly language’.

Today, on the one hand concerns about the appropriation of styles, or even narrative content, have been put to one side; no one wants to close the floodgates. On the other hand painters are deliberately and eagerly re-visiting and re-configuring Modernist tropes, and anything before it, without the same self-conscious hang-ups and ‘death of painting’ gloom; the self-criticism and irony often found in and around the activity of painting during the 1980s and 1990s. Today painting is unashamedly about painting; it is what it is. In Slippery & Amorphous both the activity itself; what seems to be a very ‘natural abstraction’, and the imagery that ensues or the final physical material realisations of that activity, are indeed hard to pin down and put into words, and yet, paradoxically, we as either viewers or those artists wielding the brush are operating in an area that is ‘known’ to us. Just as colour cannot exist without light it is this visual engagement in the visual activity – whether dance or painting (and where the author is both absent physically but also present in the artwork) – that evokes and inspires.

Katrina Blannin 2016

¹ *Real Art-A New Modernism-British Reflexive Painters in the 1990s* (published by Southampton City Art Gallery/Leeds Museum) 1996 by Brian Muller

² Apparently Real: Torie Begg's paintings by Mick Finch 1996: <http://www.mickfinch.com>

Painters

Phillip Allen

Simon Carter

Nadine Feinson

Paul Galyer

Paula MacArthur

James Petrucci

Alison Pilkington

Wendy Saunders

Ilona Szalay

Mimei Thompson



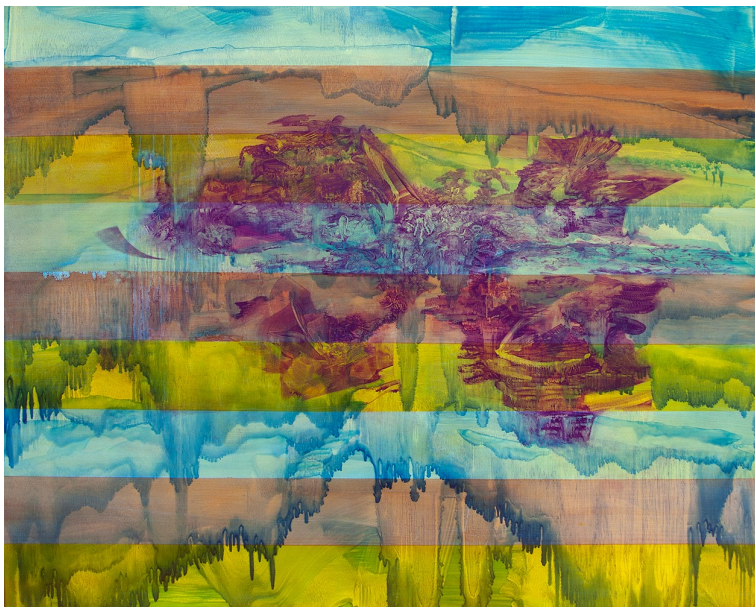
Phillip Allen

This Train Is Not Stopping (International Chit-Chat version)
Oil on board, 51 x 51cm, 2015



Simon Carter

The Pier and The Beach
Acrylic on canvas, 122 x 122cm, 2009



Nadine Feinson

Rock-I

Oil on board, 123 x 153cm, 2012-13



Paul Galyer

Fluid Dynamic
Oil on canvas, 92 x 122 cm, 2011



Paula MacArthur

Drawn to the ones that aren't afraid
Oil on canvas, 140 x 100 cm, 2015



James Petrucci

05 February 2014

Oil, acrylic & varnish on board, 30 x 24cm, 2014



Alison Pilkington

Where the Drones Meet
Oil on canvas, 97 x 87 cm, 2015



Wendy Saunders

We Are All Pussy Riot (2)
Oil on linen, 40 x 40 cm, 2014



Ilona Szalay

Instruction

Oil and resin on wood board, 70 x 100 cm, 2014



Mimei Thompson

Grey Cave

Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm, 2013

Phillip Allen

"Allen doesn't define his commitment through style but through an exploration of materiality. This is what distinguishes him from his contemporaries. Dissolution is a central feature to all of the work, the sense that entropy is unavoidable. Looking becomes a struggle to ascertain forms, to penetrate veils, to differentiate between surface and depth, as well as recognize their interaction. Allen's forms reveal themselves slowly, but never completely. Some part of them will always be embedded within the paint."

John Yau for Hyperallergic

Phillip Allen lives and works in London and graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1992. Recent solo exhibitions include The Approach Gallery, London (2014) and Kerlin Gallery, Dublin (2013). He was included in the British Art Show IV (2006) and Classified BP Exhibit Tate Britain (2005).

Simon Carter

This location, looking down a long slope of scrub and rough grass to the beach and out towards the pier, is somewhere I have drawn many times. It is at the end of the road near the studio. Arriving here early in the morning there are often small flocks of gulls or pigeons resting on the grass.

All my work starts with observational drawings made briskly and in quantity outside. I like the way drawing acts as a means of storing information and moving it from one place to another and how the information that is coded in onsite morphs when it is retrieved and reused to paint from. I hope that in the studio the records of observation in the drawings are transfigured into paint, the paintings being as much concerned with the facts of the drawing as with the initial subject matter.

The longer I stay with a painting the further I feel able to push the painting away from some kind of perceived fact and towards, I hope, a felt truth.

simoncarterpaintings.co.uk

Nadine Feinson

Feinson's painting in this exhibition takes its name from the French Rocaille, an 18th century decorative fashion for artificial grottos and interior ornamentation using fantastical concoctions of rocks, shells and plant forms. Her practice is preoccupied with the materiality of painting, in particularly the motion of image formation through mark and gesture on the surface of the painting, extending out to the choreographic 'offstage' activity of making. Temporality plays a critical role - her works start from a proposition that painting is a medium of potential motion, unstable and mutable despite apparent fixity.

She lives and works in London and the south coast and studied at the Royal College of Art (MPhil), at Goldsmiths College (MFA) and the University of Brighton (BA) and is currently senior lecturer in Fine Art Painting at the University of Brighton. She has exhibited widely, both in the UK and abroad and her work is represented in several international collections. Recent exhibitions include 'Surface to Air' and 'Dirty Pop' & Model Gallery Leeds, 'Riff/Rift' Baltic 39 Newcastle, 'Material Tension' Collyer Bristow Gallery London and 'Surface Value' James Freeman Gallery, London.

nadinefeinson.com

Paul Galyer

Much of my work is concerned with the relation of the specific to the universal. Mathematical relationships exist within the forms of nature, the Mandelbrot or fractal being distillations of such. Geometry is also present in the compositional forms of representational paintings, what is aesthetically pleasing is so because it is mathematically harmonious. The other side of the coin of course is that which is discordant, however the two are implicitly related.

These implicit relationships within an underlying whole are what interest me in spite of the appearance of multiplicity. As such my viewpoint is more neoplatonic than postmodern.

This particular painting focuses on what is scientifically known as Brownian motion, the turbulent behavior of free flowing gasses and liquids. Poured paint provides a physical presence of this and is in conjunction with painted likenesses of such. The original nature of these images is not immediately obvious it merges with the other flowing forms. The intended allusions here are to self similarity, to painting as object and subject, and to merging the supposedly opposite poles of gestural abstraction and tight representation.

paulgalyer.co.uk

Paula MacArthur

‘Paula MacArthur's paintings are a testimony to the primacy of vision. Light is not only the subject matter and content of Paula MacArthur's luminous and rather exquisite paintings but it's also their medium. Paula's paintings draw us into the now. For most of us; light can be many things, but for Paula; it's a celebration of the senses and an affirmation of values. This isn't simply a celebration of light but of life. The key to this sort of achievement is transformation. This is one of the principle elements that distinguish painting from illustration. This is the transformation from paint into light and space. A kind of latter day alchemy.’

Graham Crowley, Still Light, ‘I don’t like art’, 2015

Paula MacArthur trained at The Royal Academy Schools and now works from her studio in Rye, East Sussex.

Recent exhibitions include her solo show, 'Infinitely Precious Things', at VJB Arts, London and group exhibitions include Creekside Open 2015 selected by Richard Deacon, The Zeitgeist Open 2014, 20 Painters - Phoenix Brighton, Open West 2013 and What The Folk Say at Compton Verney.

She was a prize winner at John Moores 18 and in 2014 was selected for the WW Solo Award.

James Petrucci

Working with painting, drawing, print and installation James Petrucci's practice focuses on a fascination with the language of paint and the mediated image. His works employ subject matter sourced from the mass media, in particular portrait photography, which are inevitably infused with meaning and bias. Petrucci explores the potential of paint and gesture to disrupt and transform the image aiming to provoke dialogue around the veracity of the photograph. His approach fluctuates between photorealistic and reductive gesture, investigating process, materiality and the construction of pictorial space.

James Petrucci is a London based artist, curator and lecturer. He graduated with a Masters in Fine Art from Wimbledon College of Art in 2011 and has exhibited throughout the UK and abroad including solo and group exhibitions, residencies and workshops. He is co-founder of The Undead Painters, a forum, which explores prominent issues in contemporary painting. The Undead Painters brings together some of the strongest painters working around London to hold events including discussions and exhibitions in galleries spaces across the city.

Alison Pilkington

Pilkington describes her art practice as exploring the idea of the psychological self and how this might be manifested through painting. Her paintings are quasi-figurative. She has been developing a series of personal motifs that have developed over a series of paintings and painting installations over the last few years. In her recent body of work she attempts to play with how familiar yet comic images have the potential to disturb or disorientate or perhaps be uncanny. She focuses on how imagery interacts with the intrinsic qualities of paint, how the paint material moves and how it can be played with. The paintings are carefully planned through several stages of drawing. The quality of paint handling, although seemingly casual, is a result of repeated attempts at getting something 'right'.

Alison Pilkington lives and works in Dublin. She has recently completed a practice led PhD in painting at National College Art and Design Dublin. In 2012 she was awarded a British Institution Award for painting at the Royal Academy Summer Show London. She was selected for the Marmite Painting Prize, London (2012) and shortlisted for the Kurt Beers 100 Painters of Tomorrow publication (2013). She was 3rd prizewinner at the Artslant International Jurors Award in Dec 2013.

alisonpilkington.com

Wendy Saunders

Wendy Saunders has painted a number of works with reference to political punk collective Pussy Riot. The contrast of these masked activists overlaying a strong feminist identity acting against authoritarian oppression has helped light up a new generation of international protest movements. Her practice reflects an ongoing interest in how one intuitively reads and reacts to faces from fleeting impressions, and the subtle combination of features, even if they are mostly absent or covered, that contribute to human expression. “I am attempting to convey the tricky and largely indefinable nature of expression, mood and person using the malleable and constantly shifting nature of paint to produce a response, not with sharp reproductive clarity but rather by blurring or completely removing detail so the painting works through engagement with the viewer by suggestion, not description.”

Wendy Saunders is an Australian born painter living in London. She works in oil, painting faces from a wide range of media sources with a particular interest in women and society. She has been selected for Threadneedle Prize 2013, the Open West 2014 and exhibited in various group shows. She is a member of the peer group for Contemporary British Painting.

wendymrsaunders.co.uk

Ilona Szalay

In her work Szalay explores power play within human relationships, ideas of control and protection, dominance and vulnerability.

The paint rolls across the surface of the work - misting, gathering, billowing.. moving at its own pace in its own way, it has been permitted that, in some areas. In other parts of the work it has been forcefully controlled, marshalled and brought into line with vigour and purpose. It is these two contrasting approaches which provide the dynamism of the image. The relinquishing of control of the medium coupled with a tight decisive grip on it.

Ilona Szalay studied at Oxford University and Byam Shaw, University of the Arts. In 2013 she was a finalist for the Threadneedle Prize, won the ORA Prize and was chosen to show work in the Barbican Open Exhibition. In 2014 she was selected by Rebecca Wilson as one of 14 Artists from around the world to invest in and in the same year she exhibited paintings at Art 14 London, the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition and had a solo show entitled Mermaid at the Tart Gallery in Zurich. She has shown paintings at the London Art Fair and Art15, London in May as well as having solo exhibitions in Edinburgh, Rome and Toronto.

ilonaszalay.com

Mimei Thompson

My paintings are both process based and representational, figurative and abstract. Paint marks in the work are descriptive, but also function as illusory objects within the picture plane, with their physicality remaining dominant. The idea that everything is fundamentally connected and made of the same substance, of a world that is fluid, runs through my work. Forms appear that could morph from one thing to another; shape shifting, protean, like paint itself. The motif of the cave stands in for the unconscious mind, the inside of the body, or for a place where one could spend time and emerge changed.

Mimei Thompson studied Fine Art Photography at Glasgow School of Art, Fine Art at Central St Martins and Painting at the Royal College of Art, London. She was selected for Jerwood Contemporary Painters, and has work in the Arts Council Collection. She did a residency at Atlantic Centre for the Arts in Florida in 2015. Recent solo shows have been at Trade, Nottingham, 2014, Lunar Asparagus at Art First Projects, London 2013, The Year of Sleepwalking, 2015 and Flies in My Eyes, at Queens Park Railway Club, Glasgow, 2015.

mimeithompson.com

With many thanks to :

Robert Priseman

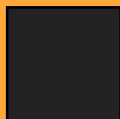
Contemporary British Painting Advisory Group

The Revd Canon Stephen Evans, Elena Mocanu and the
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Katrina Blannin for her essay

Paul Thomas at Martel Colour Print



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